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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5724
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 8488
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4392
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0523
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2243
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 4981
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000943

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: HARSH TACTICS, LESS VIOLENCE,
LESS HOPE

- REF: A. CHIANG MAI 00040 (PEACE DIALOGUE AWAITS SIGNAL
FROM NEW GOVERNMENT)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 00710 (PRISONER ABUSE ALLEGATIONS
REPORTEDLY ON THE RISE IN SOUTHERN
THAILAND)
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 00628 (STATISTICS SUGGEST MILITANTS ARE
GETTING MORE SOPHISTICATED)
[1](#)D. 07 BANGKOK 06281 (SOUTHERN DIALOGUE FACILITATOR
GIVES OPTIMISTIC READ-OUT OF BAHRAIN
TALKS)
[1](#)E. 07 BANGKOK 01675 (RISING USE OF PARAMILITARIES)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Embassy contacts contend that the recent drop in the violence in the South is not the result of progress toward resolving the underlying conflict; rather, the Thai military has become more effective at targeting more senior insurgent leaders, thus disrupting the insurgents' operations. Human rights advocates say attacks by militants, such as the March 15 hotel bombing in Pattani, appear to be less discriminate, while the army is relying on harsh, sometimes abusive tactics to gain the upper hand. Reports of torture of insurgent detainees increased. Some commanders appear to be sincere in their efforts to rein in abuses by their forces, and a recent announcement that the Fourth Army will end the practice of incommunicado detention was a positive step. Long-standing concerns resurfaced about the role of the poorly-trained paramilitary rangers in extra-judicial killings. Bangkok based south watchers in early March told Poloff the animosity felt by southern Thai Muslims towards the government is growing deeper. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Isara News Institute, which focuses on covering issues in the Thailand's troubled deep south, reported in early March that violent incidents there had decreased in February. Following up on these press articles Poloff met in separate meetings with a Bangkok based journalist with extensive

experience analyzing the southern conflict, and Sunai Phasuk, the Bangkok based Human Rights Watch representative (please protect).

Less Violence...More Dangerous

13. (C) The journalist agreed there appeared to be a lull in the violence. Bringing out closely held statistics he keeps on violence in the south, he said the monthly average of assassinations over the past several years has hovered around 80. In December, however, he recorded only 33 assassinations, followed by 73 in January, and 40 in February. (Note: By assassination, he means deaths attributed to shooting, rather than bomb incidents or firefights, regardless of whether the act was committed by insurgents, security forces, or criminal elements. End note.)

Although he was not able to provide evidence, he estimates that roughly 80 percent of the reported assassinations are carried out by the militants -- targeting both Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims. He estimates that fifteen percent are carried out by rogue elements in the security forces or by angry civilians. Perhaps five percent, he believes are carried out by security forces with some kind of authorization or approval from their superiors. (Comment: His back-of-the-envelope estimates are just an educated guess, but show an interesting evolution of analysis: in the early days of the conflict, many analysts automatically blamed the military any time a Malay Muslim was shot. Now, most analysts agree that there are a significant number of Muslim-on-Muslim attacks. End comment.)

14. (C) Many south watchers believe that the militants' leadership is diffuse, with little hierarchy. The journalist discounts these theories; he believes that, although the insurgency is composed of decentralized cells, they are well

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organized and tightly controlled. He said Thai security forces know who the operational leadership is and are effectively pursuing it. The journalist said, at the village level, militant networks have been hit hard. With so many operational leaders either killed or in hiding, lower ranking cadres are not getting the direction they need to carry out attacks. For example, the call never comes to put spikes on the road (as part of larger strike), etc., because the operational control is gone. He said the remaining militants are hard-core and angry.

15. (C) Security forces may be suppressing the violence, but the population is becoming more divided and entrenched, as are the issues dividing them. He believes there is now increased risk that the militants will try to take their fight outside the deep south, simply because there is nothing holding them back. He does not think the insurgents have much capacity to fight outside the south, however. Should they try to target something in Bangkok, it would not be a sustained campaign, and likely be limited to only one or two bombs.

16. (C) The journalist disputed the suggestion that the bombs used by the insurgents were getting more sophisticated. He said they have not appreciably changed in the past couple of years. The militants are just getting better at using them -- the tactics are better, but the bomb structure is essentially the same. Given the poor capacity of the security forces to do bomb disposal, he is surprised how few bomb disposal officers have been blown up. (Note: Reports from Embassy bomb disposal contacts about the March 15 bombing appear to support this contention. Although the bomb that exploded in front of the C.S. Pattani hotel was larger than most seen in the south, the bomb in the car was composed of fire extinguishers filled with ammonium nitrate and fuel oil--the same essential type of bomb seen in the south for the past several years. End note.)

A New Phase in the Violence

¶7. (S/NF) Sunai Phasuk, Bangkok representative from Human Rights Watch (strictly protect), is clearly worried about where the conflict is moving. At a March 18 Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand discussion on the conflict in southern Thailand, he denounced the attack on the C.S. Pattani hotel and said the conflict has "moved into a new phase of violence." He condemned the militants for having no regard for civilian life or casualties. He told us he believes the hotel bombing was a retaliatory strike for the harsh tactics used by security forces.

Allegations of Extrajudicial Violence

¶8. (S/NF) Although Sunai castigated the militants for their disregard for civilians caught in the conflict, he is equally disturbed by the tactics used by the security forces (septel). Sunai repeated previous concerns about the use of paramilitary ranger units (ref E). According to Sunai, these poorly trained and supervised units, drawn from the local population, were responsible for many of the killings now taking place, such as shooting victims in teashops and close to mosques from bronze or silver colored Toyota trucks -- which he called "standard issue death squad vehicles." Sunai said Ranger Regiment 41 based in Yala, s Bannang Sata district is notoriously bad. He illustrated his point by citing a recent incident there in which two rangers attempted to kill a Muslim villager by shooting into his house on January 30. When the villager, who had been shot, did not die, one of the rangers went into his house to beat him to death. At that point, neighbors arrived and killed the ranger. According to Sunai, the neighbors then called the Task Force Commander to tell him they had killed the man, and asked him to come after the body. Sunai said the Yala Task

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Force Commander is trying to get the commander of this Ranger Regiment removed. (This account is supported by Nonviolence International, another NGO working in the South.)

¶9. (S/NF) Sunai commented on the apparent lull in insurgent activity. He said in Yala, the militants have been hit hard by army operations. Weapons caches have been seized and destroyed and militants killed and arrested. The insurgency leadership has responded to this challenge by making their attacks more specific. "The order to militant commanders is to make at least two kills a week," preferably assassinating people by shooting them, rather than through bombing. Sunai said relations between the military and southern Thai Muslims are at an all time low and getting worse. Although violence seems to be down, those involved in the conflict are more entrenched than ever. He holds politicians and leaders in Bangkok responsible. Despite former Prime Minister Surayud, s rhetoric about reconciliation, he failed to show he could control the army on the ground in the south. Sunai said the army is pushing hard to win, and is willing to kill. Looking at the recent reduction in incidents, they believe their tactics are working.

A Bright Spot in Yala

¶10. (C) Looking for a bright spot, Sunai said there are some commanders in the south who are paying attention to the human rights situation. Despite his earlier concerns about some military actions in Yala, Sunai also praised some government officials there. The general in command of Task Force Yala appears to be trying to gain ground on the insurgency by ending human rights abuses. According to Sunai, Major General Wanathip Wongwai is committed to ending abuses in units under his command, and has vowed to court martial anyone abusing human rights. Sunai said Wanathip has tried to follow through on this commitment but is facing resistance

from commanders both above and below him. Sunai said that Wanathip's motives are pragmatic: Wanathip realizes that paying attention to human rights may help him secure his area.

Incommunicado Detention

¶11. (S/NF) Sunai believes Fourth Army Area Commander Lt. General Wirot Buacharoon's days as commander are numbered because he has been unable to control the situation in the south. He said Wirot is trying to save himself by showing progress in the insurgency, and claims he has given his troops the green light to do whatever they feel they need to in order to suppress the violence. Sunai alleges that under Wirot's watch, torture has become a routine part of the interrogation process. (Note: Ref B and septel describe NGO efforts to document increasing reports of detainee mistreatment. End note.) Abuse tends to occur in the first three days after arrest when the detainees were held incommunicado and denied access to family, friends and lawyers, under provisions of the Emergency Decree. Sunai said some army officers felt they could break detainees in three days, and get the information they needed quickly if they tortured them; commanders have told him that the use of less harsh interrogation techniques would take too long. It would allow time for lawyers and human rights organizations to get involved, and prevent the army from getting the information it needs.

¶12. (C) The Vice Governor of Narathiwat made a similar point to us in a March 24 conversation, noting that suspects tended to reverse their initial testimonies after meeting with their relatives, thereby making it more difficult to take the cases to court (the Thai justice system relies heavily on confessions to obtain convictions). Despite the perceived utility of this measure for the security forces, however, it appears mounting criticism of detainee mistreatment has had

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an impact. Speaking at a forum in Yala on March 8, which brought together officials, journalists and human rights activists, Fourth Army spokesman Col. Akkhara Thiprot said that the Fourth Army will lift the order prohibiting visitation rights for suspects during the first three days of detention. An academic who attended the meeting told us on March 17 that he believed the spokesman was sincere in making the pledge, which was very well received by the participants at the meeting, and has been reported in the press.

Comment

¶13. (C) We will be following up to see if the Fourth Army makes good on the pledge to end incommunicado detentions. If it does, it could lead to improvements in the treatment of detainees. Overall, however, it is clear that the south is locked in a troubling cycle of violence and reprisals which will be hard to stop. Glimmers of hope from former Prime Minister Surayud's efforts at reconciliation appear to be fading. The army recognizes the fight in southern Thailand as a war, and is using whatever tools it has to put down an insurgency that respects few limits. We will continue to work closely with the human rights organizations, both to better document reports of abuses and to push the Thai government to respect international norms of human rights while it struggles with the southern insurgency.

JOHN